

# LOUDOUN COUNTY PLANNING COMMISSION

## ACTION SUMMARY

THURSDAY, JUNE 3, 2010

6:00 P.M. PUBLIC INPUT MEETING

LOCATION: PURCELLVILLE ROOM  
Government Center  
1<sup>st</sup> Floor

**Commissioners Present:** Kevin Ruedisueli, Vice Chairman, At Large; Glen Bayless, Sugarland Run District; Cliff Keirce, Dulles District; Peggy Maio, Blue Ridge District; Gigi Robinson, Leesburg District; Valdis Ronis, Potomac District; Helena Syska, Sterling District.

**Commissioners Absent:** Robert Klancher, Chairman, Broad Run District; Erin Austin, Catoclin District.

**Staff Present:** John Merrithew, Assistant Director of Planning; Dan Schardein, Zoning Administrator; Marilee Seigfried, Assistant Zoning Administrator; Amy Lohr, Theresa Miller, Building and Development; Nancy Bryan, Recording Secretary.

### ZOAM 2009-0003, AMENDMENTS TO THE ZONING ORDINANCE, SIGN REGULATIONS

#### Public Comment:

1. Ralph Buona, Chairman of the Board, Loudoun County Chamber of Commerce, expressed the Chamber's deep appreciation for the Planning Commission's efforts to amend Loudoun County's unnecessarily complex and restrictive rules governing the size, use and placement of commercial signage. He stated that the number one issue facing businesses in Loudoun County is the sign ordinance. He said that the current sign ordinance classifies signs as strictly a mechanism for way finding, and that too many Loudoun businesses have seen their success undermined by the County's current sign regulations. The Loudoun County Chamber of Commerce has dozens of first-hand accounts from local business owners that have expressed real frustrations with the County's signage policies; they are equally frustrated with the lengthy, costly and often uncertain process to secure even the most basic sign. The Chamber believes the County's sign ordinances need to be supportive and reflective of current development trends, keep Loudoun competitive with surrounding jurisdictions, and provide a reasonable application process for current businesses and prospects. Specifically, the Chamber endorses changes that will 1) Provide by-right signage of adequate number, size and location to be approved administratively, without requiring legislative review and approval 2) Enhance the functionality of signage, to appropriately market Loudoun's business to visitors and to improve directional signage; 3) Enable property owners in all Commercial districts to avail themselves of adequate signage and allow property owners in non-PD districts to apply for comprehensive sign plans; 4) Protect the visual beauty of Loudoun County without sacrificing the commercial tax base and the growth of local businesses; and 5) Provide flexibility to allow the County to be responsive to unique project circumstances and evolving market trends. Additionally, the Chamber supports measures to provide clear definitions of sign terminology and a simplified sign matrix, as well as improved and streamlined processes for sign permits and approvals. He provided a copy

of the detailed policy position on revising the County's sign regulations adopted by the Loudoun County Chamber's Board of Directors.

2. Pat Worth, President, Parc City Center Owner's Association, stated that the Parc City Shopping Center consists of approximately 30 primarily small businesses, advocating for changes to the sign ordinance for over a decade. The association agrees that existing sign regulations need to be made friendlier to businesses. Their concern is that this process is being undertaken to primarily attract new big businesses and developers rather than assist current businesses. Other small businesses who want more meaningful changes to the ordinance are fearful of coming forward because they are currently in violation of the ordinance, which they feel is necessary to attract customers in order to stay financially viable. She feels that thus far, the suggestions and recommendations for change to the ordinance primarily focus on streamlining the bureaucracy of administering the ordinance rather than identifying ways to be more business friendly to existing businesses. Her association supports the aesthetic look that Loudoun County has worked hard to preserve and does not want billboards or temporary road signs under any circumstances; however, there needs to be a better balance between having unsightly signs posted everywhere and allowing businesses to attract and direct customers and job seekers using professional signs that can actually be seen. She believes that Loudoun seeks to increase its commercial tax base to support its infrastructure but doesn't want to give businesses the visibility they need to accomplish that. She said that her association would like to see changes that would expand on the use of a temporary sign that includes the regular 3 ft. x 6 ft. professional banners that are visible to customers from the parking lots. Her association applauds and supports the sign ordinance review efforts thus far and urges expansion of the proposed amendments that would favorably address the needs of existing small businesses, particularly with a more liberal use of temporary signs.
3. Keith Wallace, Representative, Merritt Properties, a privately held full-service real estate company that develops and manages office and industrial properties on a long-term basis, with 1.2 million square feet of properties in Loudoun County and home to over 70 businesses. Merritt Properties appreciates all of the efforts of the Volunteer Working Group and staff to initiate the sign ordinance modification process. During ten years of development of properties in Loudoun County, Merritt Properties has experienced frustration with the current signage guidelines with respect to limitations and inflexibility on types of allowable signage. This inflexibility has limited Merritt's ability to lease office space to larger companies who wish to locate to Loudoun and have visibility. He stated that modifying the current ordinance is imperative if Loudoun is to stay competitive with neighboring jurisdictions and create business growth. Merritt Properties is in support of the proposed signage amendments to the ordinance and encourages the Commission to adopt the changes as quickly as possible.
4. Kimberlee Welsh-Cummings, Land Use Planner, Walsh Colucci, and representative of the Volunteer Sign Ordinance Working Group, provided an overview of issues identified through the process of looking at past approved comprehensive sign plans and the modifications that have been requested, which include entrance signage versus background structure; office building/tenant signage; awnings; directory signs; and directional signs. Other major issues identified include: Sign as "use" is restrictive and

does not allow for creativity to meet the demands of the market; modifications to all of the Sign Regulations should be permitted by a legislative process to be responsive to the market; name of development, commercial center or its logo should be allowed on signs as a unifying element and should not be considered advertising - these types of logos should be allowed throughout the development as a unifying element; minor special exception process and administrative review in limited circumstances, such as a modification to a portion of an approved Comprehensive Sign Plan.

5. Karl Reidel, Waterford, VA, small business owner in Loudoun County, and member of the Historic District Review Committee, listed three issues for consideration: 1) the concept of "DeMinimis" Signage – there is no minimum sign size in the proposed regulations that would exempt incidental signs; however, they would qualify as signs to be regulated under the existing and proposed definitions. He encouraged 1) A straightforward definition of signs that are recognized to be too small for regulation. 2) Modification in the Sign Matrix Table 5-1204(d) for home occupation signs, to increase to 2/lot. 3) Sign Permit Fee Schedule – architecture and engineering firms be accorded the same annual rate opportunity as contracting companies and brokerage firms for signs complying with the Temporary Signs portion of Table 5-1204(d). This adjustment would then equally treat firms who have similar interests in presenting themselves, on a temporary basis, at project sites in the County.
6. Russ Gestl, Buchanan Partners, discussed issues encountered with the Arcola Center Comprehensive Sign Package process, such as their "A" logo; outside directories being considered as advertising; and building signs required to be the same on all four sides. His solution was to add a paragraph stating that with a comprehensive sign package other uses could be incorporated that are not specifically called out in the ordinance; however, the prior Zoning Administrator determined that this could not be done because signs are a use, and you cannot add uses that are not called out in the ordinance. He said that administratively, the Volunteer Working Group identified ways that would make the ordinance friendlier for most, and would limit the need for many businesses and developments to go through a comprehensive sign package process. He stated that he still believes there should be a comprehensive sign process option because everything needed should not be administrative and by-right.
7. Al Nielson, AOL employee, discussed how signage affects AOL's presence in the County. He explained that AOL recently displayed a temporary banner on one of their buildings to exhibit a new company logo and advertisement, as well as a temporary banner for their 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration. He indicated that they are planning a submission for permanent signage. AOL's lease space will go to one user; however, if multiple parties had been involving in the leasing, AOL may have been impacted by not being able to lease because a signage option may not have existed for those potential tenants. He said that he is in favor of more flexibility for commercial signage and would like to see a balance of appropriate signage for appropriate buildings.

**Commissioner Questions/Comments:**

- Suggestion that Pat Worth, Parc City Center Owners' Association, form a small business working group
- Businesses, especially small ones, who are in violation or who have been served violation notices, elaborate on changes they would make to their façade to bring in new business, perhaps with Chamber of Commerce involvement.
- Staff provide information as to what extent the Small Business Organization is helping the small businesses regarding signage; provide a list of violation notices regarding signs that have been served over the last two years; provide a sampling of what the various shopping centers might require of its tenants; define "temporary" sign; provide an update of the State law regarding signage; clarify signs allowed on poles within a shopping center; and obtain language regarding signage restrictions from various shopping center leases .
- Staff provide a set of clearly defined goals that the Board of Supervisors is expecting from this work effort.
- Concern about the proposed process for a minor alteration to a comprehensive sign package; minor exceptions need to be very clearly written.
- Concern for the lengthy comprehensive sign plan review process and that the process should be simplified, but to aesthetically keep Loudoun as it is.
- Concern regarding signs for buildings with a multitude of tenants.
- Staff provide visual comparison of what is currently allowed with what is being proposed.